

PULPCON 19--GUEST OF HONOR INTERVIEW, RYERSON JOHNSON

conducted by
Will Murray

WILL MURRAY: We're here to talk with Ryerson Johnson who is one of the original pulp writers. Johnny's career extends to this very day--he's just finished a western novel and is still being published in magazines and newspapers at the ripe of old age of, do you want to say it? Maybe we'll pass on that. Let's just say that Johnny saw Haley's comet both times this century. [laughter] He was born back a ways. I guess I have known you about 15 years now.

RYERSON JOHNSON: I guess so, Will.

MURRAY: When I was in college I was a big fan of Doc Savage, as I still am, and in Ron Goulart's book Cheap Thrills there was a reference to Ryerson Johnson--Johnny as he's popularly known among friends and acquaintances--that he'd ghosted several Doc Savage novels for Lester Dent. I'll make this a quick story as we want to hear from Johnny, but I was always intrigued as to who this Ryerson Johnson I'd never heard of was, if he was still around and if there was a way to seek him out. I did a lot of research into old writer's magazines and I came across a reference in an old column by Mort Weisinger, who was an editor at Leo Margulies' Standard Publications, in which he mentioned in passing having thrown a Christmas party in which Ryerson Johnson was in attendance. By coincidence I had interviewed Mort, I guess in the summer of 1975, and we stayed in touch and I wrote him. I said, "Do you still happen to be in touch forty years later with Ryerson Johnson?" He wrote me back very promptly and said, "Oh, Johnny's one of my favorite people, sure, here are three addresses. He's either in Hawaii, Illinois or Maine depending on what he's doing this month or what day of the week it is." And I wrote you and I got a long letter back and you didn't know about pulp fandom then.

JOHNSON: Noooooooooooooo.

MURRAY: Take the story from there.

JOHNSON: I got this letter from some guy I'd never heard of before and he tells me all about this pulp situation, Pulpcon, which I had never heard of. I thought that the pulps died out when tv came in and all the magazines went broke. And now they're rejuvenated and I did not know this at all. I went to the first pulp convention in St. Louis and I've been coming to them ever since. You guys and girls have got a thing here like I never saw before. You bring a whole era back. I thought there were no more pulps--I see there are.

MURRAY: One of the amazing things Johnny has always told me is he wrote for some of the best pulps, the high class pulps, Adventure, Argosy, Short Stories. I don't think you made Blue Book.

JOHNSON: I didn't make Blue Book.

MURRAY: Didn't make Blue Book. You wrote for the best of the pulps of that day, including Western Story, which was pretty high class and Wild West Weekly and others, but the thing that we most remember Johnny for is the thing that Ron Goulart had mentioned in his book. Which is that you had ghosted three Doc Savage novels. Which your name wasn't on. In fact, Lester Dent the main writer, didn't have his name on it. It was all ghost of the ghost stuff. It astonished you that the thing we all cared about was the stuff that you considered the least important to your career.

JOHNSON: You ghost something that's not your

own and that's not very important to you. You do it for whatever money is coming in. You do it when you're broke or for a friend. So, it astonished me when Will said that he checked through a bunch of my western stories and figured out the style that I used in those stories and he applied that to about 160 Doc Savage novels and figured I had written this and this and this and he was right in every case.

MURRAY: Well, no, no, one of them you had to tell me about. "The Motion Menace." One of them I couldn't figure out.

JOHNSON: That's right, one of them you couldn't figure out.

MURRAY: In fact, I got it wrong three times. At different times I thought it was this one, then I thought it was this one, then I thought it was that one.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MURRAY: You had to tell me which one it was. So, I am not as good as you give me credit for.

JOHNSON: Oh yes you are. [laughter] One of them Les Dent changed so much that it was really his story so much more than mine. "The Land of Always-Night" was the first one. What was that last one?

MURRAY: "The Motion Menace."

JOHNSON: I've written so much of this stuff for so long you folks know more about what I have written than I know. [laughter] People come up to me sometimes and ask, "What did you mean when you said such and so" and I don't even remember writing a story. [laughter]

MURRAY: Didn't you tell me once you could read your old stories and you have no contact with them at all.

JOHNSON: You have no feeling of identification really. They were so apart from personal experience. I sat in New York City and wrote western stories. I knew no more about the west than I got out of a couple books and so I read those stories now and I couldn't do them now because I had details from books that I put in the stories, blended it all in so it sounded natural. I guess it sounded natural, they sold, and I read them now without any feeling and I don't know what's going to happen. My name is up there, I must have written the story, but that's the only reason I know.

MURRAY: My famous story about you--which I guess I can tell better than you, because you didn't know anything about this--we discovered this only a couple of years ago. Johnny has always said his first sale was to Adventure. That's about as high as you could go other than I guess Blue Book in the pulps without being a slick writer. His first two sales were to Adventure. Right in the late 1920s.

JOHNSON: First three sales.

MURRAY: That's pretty good, you know, for a writer just starting out to immediately crack Adventure. What he didn't know is he'd been published before that. He didn't know that until two years ago. The story goes like this. I was looking through Mike Cook's and Steve Miller's index to the mystery and detective pulps, Mystery, Detective, and Espionage Fiction. A lot of you have that book, it's a massive reference work. And in scanning the names, I found the name Ryerson Johnson. W. Ryerson Johnson in Detective Tales, February 1923, and the story was "Nimble Fingers." Johnny was in Boston where I live, I

guess about two springs ago, and I asked him out of the blue, "Did you ever write a detective story in the early 1920s?" He said "No, no, I didn't start until early 1926," right?

JOHNSON: Yes.

MURRAY: In Adventure. I said, "You know there's a Ryerson Johnson story listed in this index." He said, "What was the title?" I couldn't remember the title at that point and I couldn't remember the name of the magazine...and you tell the story. What did you remember?

JOHNSON: Well, I simply wrote a short piece and sent it in to a magazine and that's the last I heard of it. And then, some x years later Will says, "It's printed." [laughter]

MURRAY: Some x years. 1923 to 1988. He didn't know the story had been published. He never was paid for it. He always thought he started off in Adventure. In a sense, I destroyed the best anecdote of his career, starting in Adventure. It was like a one page story. I've never seen it. You've never seen it to this day. You've never seen the printed magazine. His first story had been published in 1923 and he didn't know it until 1988. There's a writer for you.

JOHNSON: The real story starts with Adventure. I was going to be an engineer and a doctor

and all kinds of things in the university. And my senior year I took a short story course and I got my first A. Before that I almost flunked every rhetoric course I ever took because they graded you on punctuation, spelling, stuff like that. [laughter] Now on content I got my first A and I sell the story before I got through the course and so I got stuck on that and never did do anything that I learned at the university; just the stories from then on. It wasn't all easy after those first three I sold to Adventure. I bought every book I could find that told how to write a story and I crammed myself with so much stuff I guess that I couldn't sell anything else for two or three years. [laughter] But, after that I got going. I got on a freight train after I graduated the University of Illinois and with twenty dollars I went to New York because that's where the writers and editors are. And spent my first night in the bowery. Somebody reached through the chicken wire on top of these little cubicles where you sleep and stole my pants. [laughter] The Salvation Army gave me a new pair. Fortunately, I put the twenty dollars under a pillow so I didn't lose that. Apparently this happens quite often. The Salvation Army gave me some pants and I'm on my way.

MURRAY: Of course, twenty dollars was a lot more then that it is now. That would have been a major loss. I mean, it sounds silly to go to New York with only--

JOHNSON: --you could live for a week at Times Square for three dollars and a half.

MURRAY: Yeah. When you started you were a specialist. You were specializing in certain kinds of stories.

JOHNSON: Well, yeah. I met a guy William Byron Mowery. Some of you may have heard of him. And he told me I'll never make a living writing short stories about freight trains and coal mines because people aren't that interested in them. So he says pick a field. So I picked Canadian mounted police. Wrote a whole bunch of stories about the Canadian Mounties. I got a book called The Great Plains of Canada or Great Bare Lands of Canada. And out of that I got enough stuff to write these stories. Ok. The industrial revolution came along and people stopped reading mounted police stories. And so I switched to western stories. There's two books--Webb's The Great Plains and Rollins' The Cowboy. From those two books I got enough stuff to learn how to write western stories. And I read a few western pulp magazines too. Wrote hundreds and hundreds of westerns, sitting in New York. "Hudson River Cowboy" they called it. [laughter] There were two kinds of western writers. There was the real dyed-in-the-wool westerners who lived in the west, who loved the west, who knew the west and they would write meticulously about it. And then there was...well we guys in New York who read a book and wrote about the west that way. Well, I must have sold a hundred western stories I guess and I got the idea I should maybe go west and see if it's like I've been saying it was. [laughter] The biggest mistake I ever made in my life--it was not. Zane Grey's purple sage was just blistering desert with cactus and grasshoppers, and cowboys were not the romantic, noble figures that we had said they were. As far as I can see, just a couple of farmers with the bibs cut off the top of their overalls who rode a horse and knew lots of cows. [laughter] When I got back to New York it was a little harder to write western stories knowing the reality of it all, but I continued.

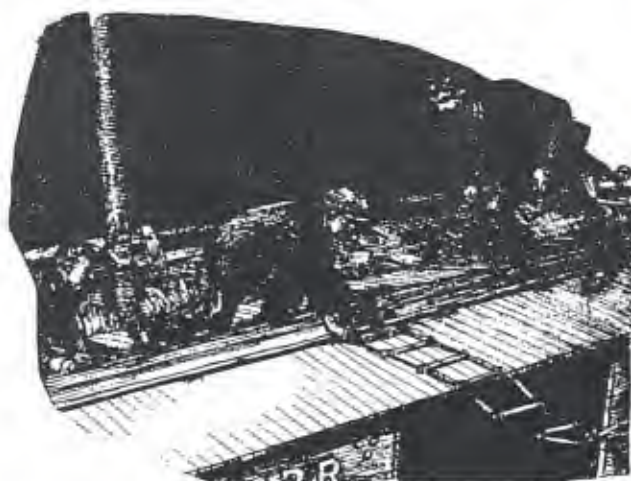
MURRAY: Did you like writing westerns?

JOHNSON: Not particularly. It never really interested me much. I'd just sell them. There was a big market, there must have been twenty or so western pulps going along then. In the old pulp days it was wonderful in one way, in that there were so many outlets that you could write a story and if it they didn't buy it here on this side of the street, you take it across the street and sell it there. You usually sold it here though once you got going. You got time and place freedom with freelance writing, which was very important. Work for yourself, work where you want to. Nobody bossing you and you don't tell anybody what to do.

RATTLER PROWLER

A Story of Freight-Car Silk Thieves

By W. RYERSON JOHNSON



MURRAY: I remember you telling me once recently--which really surprised me given the fact you started off writing coal mine stories and freight train stories and went into northwest stories and western stories and eventually detective stories--that when you started to become a writer, your interest was to write science fiction.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MURRAY: I didn't know that.

JOHNSON: And they told me at that time that science fiction was not very important. There were not enough people interested in science fiction. Actually, Gernsback's magazine was about the only one of any consequence and it was only of consequence to the extent of about a quarter of a cent a word sometimes. So, I didn't write very much science fiction.

MURRAY: In fact, most of the science fiction you wrote was Doc Savage. You know, Doc was essentially science fiction. Tell us about Lester Dent and writing Doc Savage.

JOHNSON: I met Lester Dent in the American Fiction Guild. They'd have a luncheon meeting every week in Rosoff's restaurant in Times Square and Les had written Doc Savages for some years and he was getting a little bit tired of it. He wanted to move into slick paper stuff he said. So, he began to question me on the idea of doing one, ghosting one for him. And we were good friends and I was a little broke at the time I guess too. So, I wrote it. And, I wrote three.

But ghosting isn't that important a thing to spend most of your life doing and so I went back to writing my own stuff.

MURRAY: Well, in the course of tossing those Doc's off, you did one book that is considered one of the classic Doc Savages, "Land of Always-Night." For those of you who haven't read the story, it's a lost race story--one of the things that they did very well in Doc Savage. The villain was this white-skinned, black-cloaked guy called Ool who controlled the butterfly death--his hand would flutter like a butterfly in front of your face and you would drop dead. [laughter] Do you remember what the trick was to the butterfly death?

JOHNSON: I don't remember. [laughter]

MURRAY: I don't remember either. [laughter] I haven't read the story in about 15 years. I was hoping you would remember.

JOHNSON: I haven't read it since I wrote it. I never did see the magazine even.

MURRAY: You didn't? No kidding. That was the one where they went up to the North Pole to the land of the giant mushrooms.

JOHNSON: I remember that.

MURRAY: And everybody was white-skinned and was killing people with the butterfly death and Doc had to save the princess and do all that stuff.

JOHNSON: Actually, I did a little trick there. I thought, "Gee, I'm writing this thing and I ought to do something so in the future I'll be able to prove the fact that I had done this" and so I asked Lester would it be alright. We had an underground governmental body in the North Pole called the Nonrevid. Nonrevid is Divernon spelled backwards which is my hometown. So that identifies me with that particular story. I checked it with Les and he grinned and said, "OK, sure, why not."

MURRAY: Another thing that I thought was interesting is that when you were at college your nickname was Doc.

JOHNSON: Well, they called us all Doc. My father was a doctor in a small coal mining town and my sisters and I--everybody--they called us doc. [laughter]

MURRAY: Your sisters?

JOHNSON: They called them doc too. [laughter]

MURRAY: It's funny, because your full name is Walter Ryerson Johnson, known as Johnny, and one of Doc Savage's assistants is William Harper Littlejohn who was also known as Johnny.

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MURRAY: So you were sort of similar to one of the characters.

JOHNSON: I was impressed with H. Bedford Jones and S. Omar Barker and I thought, "Gee we both got sort of common last names and tricky middle names and so an initial in front there might help." So for a while I did that but then I sort of discarded it feeling a little bit redundant.

MURRAY: Getting back to the science fiction thing. One of your stories, "The Motion Menace," was very unusual for 1937 or 1938; it involved force fields.

JOHNSON: Yeah, yeah.

MURRAY: How did you come up with the idea for force fields?

JOHNSON: I don't remember that either, Will. [laughter]

MURRAY: We're not going to learn much tonight, are we? [laughter]

JOHNSON: You write these things, then you

write another one, then forget about it. We didn't see significance in those stories the way sometimes people do now.

MURRAY: But in the sense of getting the science fiction you had in you out of your system, it must have been fun to do.

JOHNSON: I like science fiction. I read it and I enjoyed writing it.

MURRAY: Did you ever submit to Gernsback or any of those guys or Street & Smith?

JOHNSON: No, but since then I have written some science fiction that I've submitted to As-tounding and a few places like that but I haven't sold very much of it.

MURRAY: Yeah.

JOHNSON: I also did some Mike Shayne on one occasion. I knew Dave Drescher, who was a very good friend of mine, who wrote as Brett Halliday. I ghosted some Mike Shayne when he got a little bit tired of writing Mike Shayne. Sooner or later the guys that had these repetitive heroes do get tired of them and begin to hire ghosts.

MURRAY: I know what you mean. [laughter]

JOHNSON: There was a series about the Saint, remember him? Well for a while Leslie Charteris went to France and the thing was up for grabs in New York and everybody that I know had a shot at writing the Saint. I don't know, must have been a dozen different people wrote that thing. It was curious because they didn't ride very close herd over it and somebody with a little left-wing view would put a little communist stuff in it and the next time would be a little of the fascist side, confusing people who read it. [laughter]

MURRAY: You also did one other hero character we all know, the Phantom Detective.

JOHNSON: That's right, the Phantom Detective.

MURRAY: Tell us about it. You did one Phantom, "The Silent Death."

JOHNSON: Oh, yes I did that. I had a guy-- in those stories you had to have an escape scheme and a mysterious death. I had this guy chewing a cigar and when he champed down on the cigar a salt pellet would eject from the cigar and hit somebody he didn't like right in the temple. The salt dissolved and there was no sign of what had killed the victim. It was very mysterious and he was a very accurate shot to shoot all those people. [laughter] You had to have three or four of those things in the course of the story.

MURRAY: How would you explain the recoil not breaking his teeth? [laughter]

JOHNSON: I never thought about that. [laughter]

MURRAY: You never thought about that.

JOHNSON: Apparently nobody else did either, because I didn't get any reaction from it. I did get a reaction once. I had a guy whose life was saved because the villain shot at him and the recoil on the gun lifted up like this [demonstrates] until the bullet went and missed him and knocked his hat off. The bullet put a hole through his hat--this was the hero. Later on I was reminded that by the time the gun lifts up the bullet has already left and it's not going to make a difference. You make some mistakes sometimes and sometimes they were picked up and sometimes they weren't. For instance, I had a mounted policeman, he tripped in his snowshoes in a tangle of salmonberry brush and fell. That was fortunate too, because this is the time the villain was shooting at him and so the villain missed him. I later found out that salmonberry is a little plant that grows up about this high and dies in the winter time. [laughter] Nobody

caught that.

MURRAY: We talked to you earlier about the westerns you did and you got pretty tired of them after awhile, so you started to have fun with them.

JOHNSON: Yeah.

MURRAY: Tell us about some of the funny westerns you did. How you got--

JOHNSON: --I started to get the idea that... I got tired of these stalwart guys riding around shooting outlaws and rustling cattle. I got weird--stuff like having a hero who owns a mushroom spread and riding your horse on a freight train and getting knocked off by tunnels and lassoing caribou in Canada. I had an awful time selling those stories at first. [laughter] You inject humor into your stories at your peril because the cowboys are real earnest characters. Same way with a love interest in western stories --they didn't like too much love or sentiment. I remember I got a letter once from Dorothy Hubbard, editor of Street & Smith's Western Story. She said--I remember the line--"Just because your friend Lloyd Reeve puts girls in his stories don't think you have to." There were, however, very successful western romance pulps; I wrote a bunch of those too, where the gal was the most important part of it.

MURRAY: When you look back on your pulp career, never mind your post-pulp career, what did you enjoy most about the pulp world, either writing or doing what?

JOHNSON: Well, it was the time and place freedom that you got by being that way. You could make a living really from about three days a week work if you wanted to and then just goof off with creative puttering or whatever else you felt like doing the rest of the days. I never worked as hard as some of them. Some of them wrote six or seven days a week. I didn't. I got some money ahead and I didn't seem compelled to work as much. I got broke and worked.

MURRAY: Did you have it tough through the depression? Or did you--

JOHNSON: --No, no.

MURRAY: You did well during the depression.

JOHNSON: The pulp people did pretty well during the depression, Will. You could make a living on thirty dollars a week and you could

easily get that. As a matter of fact, the editors of your stories were only getting between \$25 and \$40 a week and you could make more than the editors.

MURRAY: Well that's still true; the writer generally makes more than the editor.

JOHNSON: If you work hard enough at it.

MURRAY: I think at this point we could open the floor to questions if people have questions.

LINK HULLAR: I just have one question. Will mentioned at the beginning that you had written a western novel currently. Could you tell us any information about it? Do you have a publisher? Is this going to be out soon?

JOHNSON: Well, I'm just putting finishes to it now. It hasn't been sold.

HULLAR: I was just curious.

JOHNSON: Actually, a friend died and his wife sent me about a quarter of the story, a quarter of a novel, and then asked me if I wanted to finish it. He had no roughs done, not a single note about what he was going to do with it. But he did have the beginning of the story and using that beginning I kind of figured out what could logically have happened and wrote it on that basis. I sent out though and it didn't go and I finally figured out the reason was that I kept his material, that first quarter of the story, and tried to fuse mine into it and it wasn't quite successful. So, I finally just redid the whole thing. His part and my part both, so it's a unified style at least now.

MURRAY: Was it weird getting back into westerns after all that time?

JOHNSON: No, it was kind of fun and I had that first part of the story to go on and I remembered enough about it to--

MURRAY: --so, you've learned to like westerns.

JOHNSON: No, I still don't. [laughter]

MURRAY: I think Julie had his hand up and I knew he'd want to horn in on this, so go ahead, horn in on it, Julie.

JULIUS SCHWARTZ: Johnny, why don't you tell a little bit about your brief career as a script editor out at Popular Publications and how you thought you had discovered Ray Bradbury.



A Story of the Coal Miners

By W. RYERSON JOHNSON

SOME BATTERED BUT SAFE

JOHNSON: Oh, yeah. That was a good one Julie. Alright. The westerns phased out first when tv came in and all the pulp magazines went broke. But the mystery magazines were still being printed. So I thought I've got to learn to switch from westerns to mysteries. So I took a job with Harry Steeger who is here today--perhaps you all saw him. One day a story came in so good I couldn't believe it. I took it into Rogers Terrill who was the boss man and he said, "Why sure it's a good story but it's not our type and it's got a tragic ending. We don't want a tragic ending in the story. If you like it so well, if you want to rewrite it to our specifications, I'll buy it." Ok. I rewrote the story. I put a happy ending on the end of it and changed it enough to make it a little bit logical but I really butchered the story in the process and Ray Bradbury sent in three stories which I ruined [laughter] in the interest of getting it sold. And later, about thirty years later, about five years ago or so I had a letter from Ray Bradbury thanking me for giving him a start. Some of the first few stories he ever sold. Is that the story, Julie?

SCHWARTZ: Yeah, but there's another point. I was Ray Bradbury's agent.

JOHNSON: Yeah, I knew you were his agent.

SCHWARTZ: And I told him he can't make a living just out of writing science fiction and weird fiction and to try his hand at detective or mystery stories. He did write one. I was going to bring it up to Johnny who I knew and just before I delivered the script I got a telegram from Ray Bradbury that said, "Dear Julie, please insert the following paragraph at the end of the story. I forgot to include the motivation for the crime." [laughter] And I brought this up and I gave it a good pep talk to Johnny. He never got that far. And I didn't mention too much that he had sold before and for a moment Johnny thought he had made the great discovery of Ray Bradbury.

JOHNSON: Right.

MURRAY: Walker.

WALKER MARTIN: For the last couple of years I have been buying art work from Johnny. Can you give us a little bit of an idea how you came across this art work at Popular Publications?

MURRAY: He stole it. [laughter]

JOHNSON: They treated it so casually. They'd pay \$25 for the inside art work and they'd use it and then throw it away. And when I quit the job there was all that stuff in the wastebasket and I just took a bunch of it home. And same way with the covers; they had a whole warehouse full of cover paintings, they told me to take as many of them as I wanted so I picked up three when I left and life goes on. [laughter]

MURRAY: John.

JOHN GUNNISON: Speaking of your covers, you said you remembered that there was a woman artist who did work for Dime Mystery. What else did she do?

JOHNSON: Detective Tales.

GUNNISON: Oh, and Detective Tales.

JOHNSON: She was a very pretty girl who would paint herself into all kinds of horrendous situations because she couldn't afford to hire a model just then. So, when these covers came out, there is the same girl on each cover. I don't know who that was. But the situations she put herself in was hard to believe.

MURRAY: Jack Deveny, go ahead.

JACK DEVENY: Ryerson, did you read the pulps yourself and if you did, did you have a favorite?

JOHNSON: Jack, to tell you the truth I didn't read very many pulps before I started writing